The Church, Abortion, and Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler

Robert McClory *"A Chicago Nun's Battle with Rome"*
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At 11 p.m. on December 7, 1984, Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler had just finished night prayers in her small room at St. Patrick's parish convent, on Chicago's Far Southeast Side, when the telephone rang. The caller was Sister Maureen Murray, a superior of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the Roman Catholic religious order to which Traxler belongs.

"Peggy, I'm afraid I have some bad news," said Murray, who then proceeded to read a letter that the international president of the order had just received. It was from Archbishop Jean Jerome Hamer, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation on Religious and Secular Institutes-in other words, the man who oversees the affairs of Catholic nuns all over the world. The letter stated, in effect, that the authorities in her order should demand that Traxler recant a public declaration that she had signed two months earlier. Appearing as a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times,* the declaration had challenged the church's official teaching on abortion. If Traxler refused to recant, Hamer's letter said, she was to be threatened with removal from the order. Similar letters had been sent to the superiors of 23 other U.S. nuns and of two priests and two religious brothers who had signed the same declaration. There could be no doubt about the intent: the offenders were in serious trouble, and the Vatican meant business.

"I was literally stunned after I hung up," Traxler recalls. "I felt anger, but mostly a sense of betrayal, a feeling of being cut off from my roots without benefit of a hearing by this exercise of authority from across the ocean."

Margaret Ellen Traxler had been a Catholic nun for 44 of her 61 years, working with the poor, teaching school, encouraging her fellow nuns during the turbulent years that followed the Second Vatican Council. She was the one who arranged housing for those on the move from one kind of work in the church to another, who offered counsel to those beginning to doubt their religious vocation. "I always urged people not to make hasty decisions," she says, "not to abandon their commitments quickly. I believed things were bound to get better in the church, and I still believe they will-eventually." Even her critics concede that people seem to trust Sister Margaret Traxler, almost instinctively.

And suddenly she was faced with the possibility of a painful humiliation: forcible expulsion from the religious family of which she had been such an important member and the loss of the security and care in old age that is guaranteed to members of religious orders. As for recanting the declaration, she says that she did not believe that she could do so under any circumstances.

"I decided at that point to live my life one day at a time," she says. "The Lord had taken care of me in the past, so there was no need to panic."

Within a few days, the Vatican's action against the nuns and clergymen who had signed the abortion declaration attracted wide media attention. The 28 were among 97 Catholics whose names had been published in the midst of the l984 Presidential campaign. The declaration, titled "A Diversity of Opinions Regarding Abortion Exists among Roman Catholics," argued that there is more than one "legitimate Catholic position" on abortion and that a large number of Catholic theologians hold that even direct abortion, though tragic, can sometimes be a moral choice." The advertisement, paid for by a small Washington-based group called Catholics for a Free Choice, asked for a "candid and respectful discussion on this diversity within the church."

Traxler says that she and many other signers put their names on the ad because they viewed it as a partial response to the highly publicized anti-abortion statements of Archbishop John J. O'Connor of the New York archdiocese, who was later elevated to cardinal. His insistence that a Catholic could not in good conscience vote for a pro-choice candidate was clearly aimed at Geraldine Ferraro, the Democratic Vice-Presidential candidate, a Catholic, a member of O'Connor's archdiocese, and a consistent pro-choice advocate.

"We saw the archbishop's actions as a distortion of Catholic thinking," Traxler says, "and an attempt to rig the election on the basis of this one issue. So we called for some balance in the discussion."

Yet in Rome, the abortion declaration had the effect of waving a red flag before a papal bull. Not only were the signers directly confronting the church's authority, but they were doing so with a volatile issue on which any compromise was seen as surrender to immorality, if not criminality.

The two priests and two brothers who had signed the statement submitted retractions to Rome. The 24 nuns refused. They were characterized in various segments of the press as "disobedient," "courageous," "misguided," and "heroic." Chicago's Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, in his only direct public statement on the subject (published in his column in the *Chicago Catholic* newspaper), expressed hope that the problem could be resolved by dialogue. He acknowledged, however, that it was entirely possible that the offending nuns might have to be expelled because they "directly challenged the church's constant teaching about the immorality of abortion."

Then last October, Bernardin, as chairman of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee for Pro-Life Activities, raised the issue again. "The church's teaching in this matter," he said, "is binding not only because the church says so, but because this teaching expresses the objective demands placed on all of us by the inherent dignity of human life." He added that some people "misunderstand or deliberately distort the one and only permissible position on the subject."

“I guess I should have known it would come down to this,” Traxler says. “The clouds have been gathering for a long time.” On reflection, she acknowledges that she got into this controversy with eyes open, with the same spirit of audacity that has characterized so much of her work and so many of her projects during the past 20 years.

She is, among other things, the founder of the Institute of Women Today, founder of the National Coalition of American Nuns, cofounder of the Interreligious Task Force on Soviet Jewry, an adviser to the World Council of Churches, and organizer of countless workshops and projects dealing with interracial justice. Her awards include medals from the State of Israel, Chicago Catholic Women, and St. Theresa’s College in Winona, Minnesota. She has written more than 200 articles for magazines and newspapers.

Her appearance belies her achievements. She is a short, stocky woman whose usual work attire consists of cotton blouses, baggy slacks, and a pair of sensible shoes she has worn for 15 years. It is not difficult to imagine her 25 years ago with the elaborate starched black veil over her head and shoulders, the stiff white wimple across the breast, and the floor-length dress that constituted the traditional uniform of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Even in secular clothes, she retains that aura of other-world piety and this-world practicality that characterized so many of those nuns of yesteryear who expected great achievement from their students and often got it. The voice is reassuring, always motherly; the eyes, alert; the jaw, firm and strong—a bit like the jaw of Pope John Paul II.

Yet Traxler is in every sense a liberated woman, a feminist, an iconoclast, a prophet, who views Pope John Paul II as the misguided defender of a dying patriarchal system that represents neither the will of God nor the essence of the Catholic Church. She is therefore a woman of two eras, whose individuality and creativity have been deeply stirred during this crisis-producing era of Catholicism.

Margaret Traxler was born in Henderson, Minnesota, a small town 60 miles southwest of Minneapolis. On the walls of her small, neat office at 1307 South Wabash Avenue are paintings of rural scenes: a barn, a snow-covered field, an old railroad station. They were painted by her sisters and remind her of her beginnings. Her father was a country doctor, her mother a nurse. Margaret was the next to the youngest of five daughters. Her father, she recalls, was out delivering babies at all hours but somehow managed to give plenty of attention to his girls. “It was he,” she says, “who really understood me and would caution my mother not to discipline me too strictly. ‘We mustn’t break her spirit,’ he would say.” On the other hand, neither parent would abide fighting among their daughters. “When people would ask my mother how we would fight life’s battles, she would tell them, ‘I don’t know, but they will not learn by fighting with one another.’”

The four surviving sisters (the eldest died in l953) remain extremely close today. Each summer they gather for a week in northern Wisconsin, to play bridge, exchange

news, and discuss the books they have been reading. Soon after the word came from Rome, Traxler set up a long-distance telephone conference call with her sisters, all of whom are married and live in the St. Paul area. They talked at length about the publicity and Traxler's possible expulsion. "Well," Traxler said finally, "if I am dismissed from the order, I'm just glad Mom and Dad are not alive to see it."

"Nonsense," her older sister Jean Smith recalls telling her. "They would be proud of you for taking a stand. It's what all of us should be doing." The other two concurred that Margaret was just where a consecrated follower of Christ ought to be in this age: in the eye of the hurricane, on the cutting edge of change.

"What people can't realize," Smith now says, "is that Margaret has always been filled with love and gentleness. They hear some of the critical things that she says and judge her that way. But it's only in the face of injustice that she's hard. From childhood she's been that way."

After a Catholic high-school education, Margaret decided to become a nun, she says, "because I wanted to be of service to others and that seemed the best way." In l941, at the age of 17, she joined the School Sisters of Notre Dame, a religious order started in Bavaria in the early 19th century, especially to educate girls. To get approval from male church authorities for such work, the order's founder, Theresa Gerhardinger, argued that better-educated girls would make the sort of well-rounded mothers who could encourage the intellectual development of their sons.

When Traxler entered the order, it was involved in the full range of Catholic education and had accepted the rigid rules and chilly spirituality of the day, while submerging any hint of individuality from its members. After entry into the order, nuns were permitted to return home only twice in a life-time. Complete obedience was expected—and received. It might seem surprising, but Traxler adjusted well to the discipline and found her work as an elementary and high-school teacher for the next 20 years happy and fulfilling. "I always felt at home in the classroom," she says. "I enjoyed the interchange with candid open young people. But I also came to see through my years in Catholic schools that priests were not the all-knowing leaders we had supposed them to be. A lot of them were, in fact, plain incompetents.

"Almost accidentally," she says, "I wandered into a poor neighborhood, poorer than anything I'd ever seen before, and I realized for the first time that huge numbers of black people live in gritty poverty."

She joined the National Conference on Interracial Justice, and in l964 she was named the Chicago-based organization's director of education. Meanwhile, the church's Second Vatican Council, still in progress in Rome, had issued a historic document that urged religious orders of women to try to recapture the special gifts of their founders, to re-evaluate the kind of work they were doing, to allow members more freedom, and to ease the old restrictions, which included mandatory attendance at community prayers

several times a day, traveling in the outside world only rarely-and always with a nun companion-and obtaining permission from the superior for even the slightest deviating from schedule.

A period of unprecedented turmoil followed. Conservative (usually older) nuns clung to the old ways. More adventurous (usually younger) nuns moved from convents to apartments, switched to secular clothes, and turned to such endeavors as community organizing and social work. In the process, many discovered that life in the religious order was no longer what they wanted. Between l965 and ll984, some 62,000 nuns in the United States left their religious orders.

Traxler says that she was not tempted to leave because she believed she was embodying the spirit of the Vatican Council in her work with the interracial justice conference. She joined the civil-rights movement. A memorable newspaper photo shows a line of freedom marchers in Selma standing face to face with a group of menacing Alabama troopers. In the front row, still in full religious habit, is Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler.

"I saw how indefatigable women were in the movement," she says. "I also saw how they weren't included in the decisions of the male civil-rights leaders. And they still aren't."

Working for the interracial justice council, she established a national reputation for starting schools, for the inter-ethnic education of teachers; founding a program that placed 400 teachers with doctorates in black colleges while the black faculty members completed their advanced degree work; and organizing workshops on inter group relations and the implications of racism. She served as an adviser on women's affairs for Church Women United and traveled to Central America and India, where she says that she was appalled at the living conditions of women.

"In Iran a mother confided to me that the cow in her husband's barn was far more precious to him than she was," Traxler recalls. "In Bombay I saw 11-year-old prostitutes waiting for customers on street corners at four in the afternoon."

She says that she became convinced that most Catholic nuns were living in an unreal world. "Jesus entered the real world totally," she says, "and that's why he spoke with such authority." Traxler spoke and wrote on racism and women's rights with such vehemence—especially in Catholic publications such as the *National Catholic Reporter*—that she was regarded in conservative circles as an agitator. Soon her reputation spanned the ocean. In l968 she attended an international meeting in Rome for members of her religious order. One of the addresses was given by a German priest-sociologist, who discussed problems of social justice but concentrated entirely on the European scene. At the end, Traxler raised her hand and calmly listed ten problems afflicting Americans, including racial discrimination and the fragmentation of the family. She then asked his opinion on an 11th problem: the failure of the church "to minister to all its people" by refusing to ordain women priests. Unaware of her identity, the speaker

complimented her on the polite way that she had presented her concerns, then added that he was sorry all American sisters could not be so temperate in their remarks. “For example,” he said, “there’s that belligerent woman Sister Traxler!” Before he could finish, the assembly hall erupted in sustained laughter, and the red-faced priest entertained no further questions.

She left the interracial justice conference in l974 to devote more time to establishing the Institute of Women Today and directing the National Coalition of American Nuns (NCAN), which she had helped organize in l969. The coalition, which today claims 1,800 members, is the first and only organization of feminist sisters in the United States and always seems to be in the midst of controversy. “NCAN tries to be on the cutting edge.” says Sister Donna Quinn, another leader of that organization. “We’re calling the church and society to change, to end oppression wherever it exists.”

The coalition’s most celebrated skirmish occurred in 1982 when the National Conference of Catholic Bishops endorsed a Constitutional amendment proposed by Republican senator Orrin Hatch of Utah. It would have allowed state legislatures to restrict or ban abortions. The coalition sharply criticized the bishops for their willingness to leave pregnant women at the mercy of local politicians. In an appearance on the Phil Donahue show, Traxler and three other nuns said that the Catholic hierarchy would be better advised to educate men on the responsibilities of fatherhood.

Pressed during the television program for her explicit views on abortion, Traxler said, “I believe every human being has a free will, God respects our free will even though it is sometimes used against God’s will. I believe women must have the right to use their free will in making decisions about their own bodies. . . I want women to choose life for the fetus. I see a dichotomy in men telling them to bring the fetus to term and then cutting off those resources necessary for women to nurture life.”

The furor that ensued among members of Donahue’s typically polarized studio audience repeated itself in the press for weeks. The Pope was not pleased. Archbishop Pio Laghi, the Vatican’s apostolic delegate in Washington, let the sisters know through official channels of Rome’s displeasure, but no formal threat was made on that occasion

When in 1983 the Vatican ordered an investigation of religious orders in the United States (under the direction of a committee of bishops), with the intention of ending the period of experimentation and halting “abuses” that had crept in since the Second Vatican Council, Traxler was most vocal in expressing the indignation simmering among the rank and file. “The Pope wants us back in the 19th century, “she says today, “hearing nothing, seeing nothing, and fulfilling the mandates of the patriarchy without question. And the bishops are going right along with him. Well, we’re just not going to let that happen.”

To be sure, not every Catholic nun shares Traxler’s assessment. Many would be happy to see religious life revert to the days before the Second Vatican Council. And even some who endorse her overall goals take issue with her consistently

confrontational style. “Signing the *New York Times* ad was a mistake politically, theologically, strategically, and personally,” says Sister Carol Crepeau, the co-director of the Office for Religious for the Archdiocese of Chicago.

“A strongly worded ad is not the best place to start a dialogue.” Moreover, says Crepeau, the wording of the ad was so vague that it could create the false impression that Catholics are perfectly free to regard abortion as generally acceptable.

“I think we’re just antagonizing an angry bear if we back the Pope and bishops into a corner,” says Sister Honora McNicholas a Chicago-area social worker and one of the very few nuns willing to speak on the record about Traxler’s style. “Maybe the confrontational approach causes awareness, but another approach is necessary to really bring about the change.’”

Traxler acknowledges that there may be some merit to that, but she says she tired of the cautious and humble style long ago. Besides, she says, she is more interested in her day-to-day ministry than answering critics point by point.

As she eases her 1978 Chevrolet Nova onto the Stevenson Expressway and heads south-west on the 80-mile trip to the Dwight Correctional center, a state prison for women, Traxler says that she feels a sense of accomplishment. The back of the car and the trunk are packed with mounds of blue denim destined to be converted into shoulder bags—the final phase of a project on which she has been working for many months.

She goes to the prison every few weeks. It is one of the targets she and her associates have concentrated on since l974, the year she founded the Institute of Women Today as an organization “to explore the historical and religious roots of women’s liberation.” The direction that the institute should go became clear to her after she visited a Federal prison for women in Alderson, West Virginia, to seek the advice of an old friend, Jane Kennedy, whose determined civil disobedience in protest of the Vietnam War resulted in a Nobel Peace Prize nomination as well as more than three years in prison. Traxler was accompanied to Alderson by another friend, Dorothy Day, the leader of the Catholic Worker movement. As the two signed in, an attendant asked the purpose of the visit. Said Day, half facetiously, “You can say we’re here to start a revolution.” The remark may have proved more accurate than anyone realized. “If you want to help women,” Kennedy told the visitors “go into the prisons!” There, she said, they would find a truly oppressed, forgotten minority.

So Traxler recruited a group of volunteers and began visiting women at Cook County Jail, Alderson, and state prisons in Illinois, Indiana, Mississippi, and elsewhere. She says she discovered that the women, unlike male convicts, tended to become extremely passive and submissive in prison conditions. “So many,” says Traxler, “were victims of their own sad history. The average inmate was about 23, with two children, no husband, and no skills.”

Traxler brought teams of women lawyers into the prisons to hold workshops on legal rights. She organized intensive journal workshops in which the women learned the therapeutic benefits of regularly writing down their innermost feelings. She started courses in carpentry, plumbing, and electrical work with assistance from instructors at Kennedy-King College. She also lined up painters, sculptors, and quilt makers to help develop the creative potential of the inmates. Until the cost became prohibitive, the institute funded a full-time women's advocate at the Cook County Jail.

Today the Institute of Women Today has branches on the West and East coasts, a volunteer staff of some 75 lawyers, counselors, and teachers, and regular programs in ten prisons and several county jails. When she learned two years ago that Church Women United, a large interfaith organization, usually contracted with Third World companies to produce shoulder bags for distribution to its members at the annual convention, she went to the organization's leaders and said, "We've got the Third World right here! How about giving women inmates a chance-as the Book of Proverbs says-to see the work of their own hands?" A deal was arranged and the prisoners at Dwight got the contract.

This year the Dwight women joined women from other state prisons in producing 6,000 denim shoulder bags for the United Presbyterian Women's Conference, and Traxler is working on the United Methodist women for a contract next year.

As she drives down the familiar highway to Dwight, Traxler explains how contact with women convicts has shaped her views. "Of course, most of them are guilty of a crime," she says, "and everyone who breaks the law should be held accountable. But women face a lot more obstacles than men in this society, especially if they're poor, young, and minority. A girl gets pregnant, she drops out of school. She loses her peer group and she can't get a job, so she gets desperate. What drives me up the wall is the men in Congress who want to cut back on food stamps, cut back on child nutrition programs. They're hypocrites! And the men who run the church? Why, they're too busy condemning abortion. Then there are the women in prison for murdering a husband or boyfriend. Studies show that the average woman took terrible abuse for five years before taking action."

Once she gets started on the subject, Traxler can hardly be stopped. "Now I'm an old nun," she says, "but I've yet to meet one of these women who couldn't be changed--not if you had the chance to break bread with them, live with them. You know, you have no business going into those places unless your presence brings comfort. Isn't that what Jesus meant: "I was in prison and you visited me?"

Dwight, originally built for 200, houses about 536 prisoners on the day of Traxler's visit. One reason for the increase, say the experts, is women's equality. Out in the world, women are committing the sort of crimes—fraud, narcotics, peddling, robbery—formerly reserved to men. And they are no longer receiving light sentences by reason of their sex.

“I always get a claustrophobic feeling when I come here,” says Traxler, as a guard opens the gate for her car. “It reminds me of entering the novitiate when I decided to become a nun.” She drives this latest supply of denim to the crafts building in the middle of the prison complex and warmly embraces the inmates who come out to unload the material.

In the basement of the building is a room with a dozen sewing machines, donated through Traxler’s intercession by the Presbyterian Church of Western Springs. On the door is a plaque that read BAGS INCARCERATED. Here the women are transforming the denim into bags for which the Presbyterian group will pay $3.50 apiece, half of which goes into a Dwight residents’ benefit fund and the other half to the women who labor on the project. “This is just marvelous work you’re doing,” says Traxler, examining a bag. “I think you should be proud.”

Although Dwight inmates also are employed making shirts, drapes, and other items for use in the Illinois correctional system, this is the only enterprise in which goods are produced for an outside institution—and for a real, albeit modest, profit.

“What they’re doing here is great for morale,” says Jeanine Fairman, family advocate at Dwight. “It gives the women a sense of self-worth and helps develop a spirit of camaraderie.” None of it would be possible, she adds, without the powerful presence of Traxler, who inspires “a kind of wonderful loyalty.”

“Sister Margaret has a way of bringing a sense of well-being to people,” says the Dwight warden, Jane Huch. “She’s a great influence and is always welcome here.”

Meanwhile, Traxler moves among the workers, squeezing shoulders, conferring about family matters, chuckling over private jokes. She tells the women about a Dwight “alumna” with whom she has maintained contact: “She got her GED diploma and computer training while she was here. Then she got a job with an interior decorating firm, and now she just made vice-president of the company! Isn’t that something?” Everyone smiles and nods, agreeing at least for that fleeting moment that all things are possible.

Later, as she leaves, one of the women hands her a note. “My mother has been in bed since last week and I’m really worried,” it says. “Could you see her?” Below is the address, which Traxler intends to visit the following morning.

On the drive back to Chicago, she keeps to a steady 55 miles an hour. She was stopped for speeding one day last March, but the trooper let her off without a ticket when he recognized her from her appearance on a *60 Minutes* segment concerning women in the church.

Her greatest joy in prison ministry, she says, is teaching a course on women in the Bible. “I love to talk about how they’re cast aside, like Ruth or Jezebel or Hagar, but

they don't give up. The women enter the discussions so easily, and sometimes we even get a bit rowdy."

Male prison chaplains, she says, usually do not relate well to female inmates, and for that reason she would like to be ordained-"just so we could celebrate the Eucharist together after we've talked and prayed." But, she adds, "I wouldn't want to be one of those priests who are caught up in real-estate deals and keeping their buildings repaired."

Traxler insists on maintaining "an aesthetic-distance" from the institutional Catholic Church and the leadership of Pope John Paul. "He wants to rebuild the family by telling women what to do," she says. "He's afraid, and he thinks he can control an idea by controlling us. You don't begin by telling women to have babies. You rebuild the family be telling men to stay with their families beyond conception."

In her judgment, "the church is a masculinized, brittle institution in which the bishops, including Cardinal Bernardin, readily subordinate common sense, the needs of the people, and the lived experience of women to the autocratic will of a Pope who is determined to dominate, no matter what."

She planned to make that point clear in her testimony at one of the special "listening sessions" sponsored in late October and early November by the Chicago archdiocese. The purpose was to gather women's views in preparation for a forthcoming pastoral letter on women by the bishop's conference.

Traxler intended to present the cases of five anonymous, poverty-stricken mothers who must make difficult decisions about sterilization, birth control, or abortion and who, she said, "should be allowed to live according to the decisions of their conscience free of guilt."

"I hope Cardinal Bernardin hears us, "she said, "but he cannot respond realistically because the Vatican makes the final decisions."

Given her disagreement with the church's present leadership and her proven talents as an administrator, hasn't she considered the possibility of abandoning the old vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in favor of a freer lifestyle? "Oh, no, indeed not," she says very firmly. "I make my vows to God, not the Pope!"

The Catholic author and columnist Abigail McCarthy (estranged wife of one-time Presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy) has known Traxler since she taught the young nun a course at St. Catherine's College in St. Paul some 40 years ago. "I would call Margaret an extraordinarily achieving woman," she says, "very innovative and very dedicated to solving social problems. In the best sense of the word, I'd call her a bridge builder."

That view is shared by Ralla Klapek, a Jewish lawyer from Chicago whom Traxler recruited during the formative days of the Institute of Women Today. "I told her I wasn't a religious person," Klapek says. "I don't pray; I don't even know what God is. She said, 'That's all right; religion is doing good for people.'" Thus Klapek, found herself trekking to prisons in West Virginia and Indiana, teaching courses in fundamental law, demanding that prison officials provide adequate law libraries, and launching English courses for Hispanics and Haitians. In l981, as a frightened Klapek was being wheeled down a hall at the University of Illinois Hospital for a cancer operation, the last thing she remembered was Traxler telling the medics, "This is a valuable and precious person. Be very good to her!" During her recovery, Klapek was deluged with cards and letters from sisters, convicts, guards, and others she had met through the institute. "Now," says Klapek, fully recovered, "I know what prayer is: collective love. And I felt its power." For the first time in her life, Klapek has begun attending synagogue services.

Margaret Byrne, another Chicago attorney who works with the institute, says that she is amazed at what happens when Traxler descends on the oppressive environment of a prison with a battery of lawyers and artisans. "She always focuses on people as having great worth and potential," she says, "not as outcasts. She brings out the best."

…she stands in the sanctuary before some 150 members of the Ner Tamid synagogue, a Conservative Jewish congregation on Chicago's North Side. Traxler, wearing a gray business suit, commands full attention. "Whenever I speak to a Jewish group," she says, "I feel as Moses did, that I stand on holy ground." She often addresses Jewish audiences and is always well received, since she is the cofounder (along with Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum) of the National Interreligious Task Force on Soviet Jewry, an organization that has involved Christian churches in helping Russian Jews emigrate to the United States.

"When I visited Dachau in l968, I experienced a kind of conversion," she says, "I saw the ovens, the human ashes at the bottom of a pond, and pictures in the museum. And when I realized this was done to six million Jews by baptized Christians, I decided to do something." The task force has since become an active vehicle for educating church groups about the strained history of Jewish-Christian relations and encouraging projects to promote understanding. For her efforts, in l976 in Brussels, Traxler received a State of Israel medal from Prime Minister Golda Meir.

At Ner Tamid, she has been invited to speak as part of a panel exploring "threats to our freedom"—a topic that lends itself easily to the subject of abortion. She takes pains to explain that she does not favor abortion, and that she considers herself "pro-life," praying for the day when society will support life for mothers and children regardless of race or economic level. But she makes it equally clear that she opposes laws banning abortion because they interfere with free will. Then she touches on a point mentioned in the *New York Times* ad: Only 11 percent of Catholics disapprove of abortion in all circumstances. "We tried to put it in the mildest possible tones," says Traxler of the ad. "We could have said 89 percent of Catholics approve abortion under some circumstances."

Everyone laughed. The crowd is well aware that the doctrines of the Catholic Church are not determined by popular vote, but this substantial discrepancy between official teaching and the view from the pews is an anomaly that cannot be lightly dismissed.

The bottom line in the abortion debate is whether a fertilized ovum is a human being from the first moment of conception. On this key issue the church's rationale has not been absolutely consistent. It has shifted over the years. For example, the Catholic Church for more than 15 centuries held as a certain fact that a human soul was *not* present during the first stages of pregnancy. Father Joseph Donceel of Fordham University notes that the catechism of the Council of Trent in the 16th century taught that it required a miraculous intervention on God's part to infuse a human soul in Jesus in the very moment of his conception. In ordinary circumstances, the church insisted, the human soul is infused at a later point, and there was considerable debate about exactly when. Only in the past 100 years or so have popes and bishops agreed that a fertilized ovum is to be regarded as human from day one.

This is not to say that the church ever approved abortion; it condemned the practice not because it was murder but because it was seen as a form of birth control. What Traxler and other signers of the ad argued was that the issue is not as simple as it seems and that a change of view in the future-as in the past-should not be categorically rejected.

Further complicating the matter, is a debate whether responsible dissent within the church is permissible. Disagreement between theologians and bishops had long been a custom in Catholicism before it was squelched in the middle of the 19th century by Pope Pius IX, says Leonard Swidler, professor of Catholic thought at Temple University in Philadelphia. Reinstated, at least theoretically by the Second Vatican Council, he says, such dissent serves as a balance to the tendency of pope and bishops to impose assent by decree. Today there are some Catholic theologians -Daniel Maguire of Marquette University being the most vocal-who contend there are extreme circumstances, for example pregnancy caused by rape or incest, when a woman might legitimately seek an abortion in the early stages of pregnancy. This, of course, opens up a host of questions such as just what constitutes an extreme circumstance and what precisely are the limits of the early stages.

On the other hand, the Pope and bishops stand firm in their insistence that there are no situations, extreme or otherwise, justifying a direct abortion. That view is heartily echoed by most pro-life advocates. Says Joseph Scheidler, outspoken executive director of the Chicago-based Pro-Life Action League, "People like Margaret Traxler are more sinister than the out-and-out abortionists. They've bought the feminist agenda and have no allegiance to the authority of the church. They should go into social work and stop pretending they're religious people."

Traxler herself says she doesn't know when the fetus is really a human being, and neither does medical science and neither does the church, so the final decision must be left to the woman who is pregnant.

Does that mean she would condone a decision to abort, even if the fetus were in the last trimester? "That is a very hard question," she says. "I can't believe a woman would not choose life for her baby when it's so far along. I would hope she would act with an informed conscience, not selfishly." Still, she recoils at legal compulsion at any point. "Abortion laws have been made by men to enhance their own power and domination," she says. "The time has come for women to make choices."

"Let's face facts," she tells the audience in the synagogue. "Women's overall record for nurturing life has been pretty good from the dawn of history. We've carried children, borne them, nurtured them. Today there are nine million single mothers raising children in the United States. Nine million! I think women deserve to be trusted."

Toward the end of her presentation, she mentions her impasse with the Vatican. "We crossed a threshold when we signed that ad," she says. "While the Vatican is treading the waters of the Tiber, we moved ahead and named the unacceptable. There will be no going back."

The applause is warm. "You have put your life's calling on the line on behalf of us," says a middle-aged woman

Afterwards she's back in her old Nova for the long drive back to St. Patrick's Convent. There are letters to be answered, calls to be made, articles to be written. Above all looms her responsibility for raising all of the money to meet the budget of the Institute of Women Today. I've never given a minute's thought to retiring," she says. "I have plenty to keep me occupied"

Throughout this year, the 24 nuns who signed the declaration met regularly, holding firmly to their position, while petitions with thousands of signatures protesting the Vatican ultimatum were sent to Rome. Meanwhile, the heads of appropriate religious orders conferred, seeking a quiet compromise. Eventually, the Vatican prefect, Jean Jerome Hamer, seemed to ease his position. He lifted, at least temporarily, the demand for retraction if the nuns would declare that they accepted the authority of the church and would pledge not to advocate abortion publicly. Like the others, Margaret Traxler made such a declaration—through her understanding of "the authority of the church" may differ somewhat from that of Hamer.

It is by no means certain, however, that the dispute is over. In a visit to the United States in August, Hamer said that the signers must take steps "to repair the scandal" and reiterated that expulsion from their orders remained a possibility, although he acknowledged the "good will" of all involved. In early November it was announced that six of the 24 threatened nuns had sufficiently satisfied Rome and were no longer under threat. Traxler was not among them. Nevertheless, the signers of the advertisement

were left no closer than before to what they had sought from the beginning: an open dialogue with the church on the thorny matter of abortion.

“I don’t know if my religious order or any of the others will survive in the long run,” she says. “We will if it’s God’s will, and we won’t if we fail to deepen a presence among the poor and the oppressed. I don’t care if there are any young nuns around to tend my grave. It’s good we lived; it’s good we died. And if I’m expelled from the order, I’m fully prepared to take a place with the rejected women of history.”